

IF Chapter: Natsuki Rem

Under the radiant sky, Subaru squints his eyes at the sun's strong rays.

A deafening cry can be heard.

The voice belongs to a baby girl, her forceful crying filled to the brim with all the strength her tiny body can muster.

Seeing her express her discomfort with the strength of her entire soul, Subaru wonders how it is that children can be so unbelievably energetic. And while thinking that, he shudders at how lacking in youth his thoughts have become.

[I've had a feeling I've been getting on lately, but it's pretty depressing to be consciously aware. Aren't I still a super lively *YOUNG MAN*!?]

["Super lively *YOUNG MAN*" my ass. Try looking at yourself a little more objectively.]

While clutching his hands dramatically, Subaru is bombarded with trash talk. Used to the verbal abuse, he sighs lightly and looks to his side. A young boy stands beside him, his eyes level with the sitting Subaru. Ignoring Subaru's silent stare, he adds,

[Anyways, do something about Spica already! Her crying's seriously getting on my nerves.]

[No, I just can't go on anymore. After that last cruel remark, my *NAIVE HEART* is completely in tatters! Maybe I'll revert back to childhood and cry alongside Spica. Please forgive your useless father!]

[Who the hell's gonna forgive a grown man acting out in broad daylight like that!?!]

The boy retorts loudly at Subaru's childish sulking. And, as he yells, the baby cradled in his arms, Spica, sucks in another mouthful of air. As the two men watch on helplessly, she once again explodes.

[WAAAAAAAAUUUU!!!]

[Whoa! She's crying! Spica's crying again! Hey Rigel, do something damnnit, you're her older brother!]

[If you're playing that card, then YOU should be the one doing something about this!]

Among the crowded city streets, in a certain boulevard, two men endlessly pass back the responsibility of calming the baby.

Passing townsfolk look to see what the commotion is about, see that it's these two clowning around, and proceed to casually ignore them with a face that says [oh, it's the same deal as always].

As a result, the tired act of the crying baby, and the two men that make her cry, goes on.

[This girl's crying out her lungs and soul and yet not a single person comes out to help... Damn, what a cruel and unreasonable world! Humanity has fallen so damn far!]

[We don't have time for you to lament about the state of the goddamn world! If we can't stop Spica's crying, when she comes back, what do you think she'll say-]

[When *who* comes back, and *what* will they be doing?]

[Well that's obvious, it's....]

[Rigel], Subaru calls as they huddle for a moment. Nodding their heads in unison, Rigel first turns around. He stares dumbfoundedly, his jaw ajar. Subaru follows his line of sight.

[Hey, all done with the shopping?]

[Yes, without delay. ...It looks like things were tough on your end though.]

[Nah, Spica's *super* energetic today. Once she starts walking and running around, I bet she's gonna grow up to the type that just flings around men at her own insane pace. Such a nefarious future, it makes me both nervous and excited!]

As Subaru chatters casually, Spica, cradled in his arms, slowly opens her eyes and notices the woman now standing before her.

Despite her weak upper body, she opens her small hand and extends her arm out to her. Sensing Spica's desire, Subaru feels just a bit lonely.

[But well, ignoring her until she cries will just bring us back to square one. Here, take her.]

[I have taken her.]

Despite his rough speech, Subaru passes the baby with incredible care and caution. He handles her like a valuable, transient treasure, bringing a tiny smile to the woman's face.

The woman hugs the baby to her breast and carefully rocks her.

[Yes, what a useless father and older brother aren't they? Spica needs to get bigger quickly so she can scold the two of them.]

[Hey hey, let's not feed her ideas like that while she can't understand words, okay?]

Subaru suddenly imagines being scolded on both sides by the two, hands on their hips, after saying or doing something stupid.

[Hm, it actually doesn't sound so bad. In fact, it's such a happy vision of the future that I'm tearing up.]

[Well I don't like it. Getting scolded by my little sister would ruin my dignity.]

[Ha! The moment someone fools around with me, they *have* no dignity to ruin. Yes, yes, I can see it... you will adore your little sister and spoil her far too much, to the point where she's scolding and spanking you without reserve. *That* will be your future!]

[Don't push some weird future onto me just because *you* like getting scolded and spanked! There's *no way* I'll be like that!]

Subaru wags his finger tauntingly as Rigel retorts. But it isn't Subaru who is agitated by the boy's roars.

It's the blue-haired woman who was watching over their bumbling. With a calm yet sharp voice, she calls the boy's name.

[Rigel. What kind of language have you been using out in public. It brings your mother to tears.]

[Yeah but...]

[Your mother also doesn't like your "Yeah but"s either. Also, what you said just now was mistaken.]

She mercilessly scolds the stammering Rigel. She then turns to Spica, who has finally calmed down, and smiles briefly.

[Your mother does *not* spank your father. Your father is always your mother's number one favorite person after all.]

Blushing, she makes a remark even more embarrassing than crying in public.

Against his mother who so proudly makes such a declaration, Rigel finally throws in the towel.

Subaru laughs nervously as the woman who watches over her family so happily caresses her hair.

As if it was a fragment of the clear blue sky, Rem's beautiful long blue hair shimmers elegantly with the wind.

In a small district in the country of Kararagi, at a clearing that may or may not qualify as a park, Subaru lumbers onto a nearby bench.

The boy with short blue hair named Rigel played rambunctiously with his friends. While the way he spoke with his father was awful, Subaru thought in moments like these that he might actually be a cute kid.

[Now if only we could deal with those eyes that make him look like he could kill someone.]

[We can't do that. Those scary eyes are also a part of Rigel. No matter how much fun he's having or how happy he is, strangers will always see his eyes and think he's in a bad mood or that he's some kind of delinquent. That's just who Rigel is.]

[I can *hear* you. Also, why does mom's retort hurt even more than dad's!?!]

Rigel was playing "Freeze Tag" (*literally Ice Oni in Japanese), a game that Subaru had popularized recently. Having been frozen, Rigel can only comment from afar. Subaru carelessly waves over to him while Rem waves ever so gently so as not to disturb Spica.

Rigel puffs his cheeks and wrinkles his face in turn. At that moment, Subaru can't help but think that Rigel looks just like he did in his own childhood albums.

[In other words, he's pretty much guaranteed to end up just like me. If I was him, I would definitely try to fight it... if I was told I'd be me in twenty years.]

[Skilled in cooking and perfect in housework. Supporting her husband with all her love and care. Having such an ideal and wonderful wife... is what you're talking about yes?]

[Who is that happy-go-lucky normie, damn he should just *explode*. Huh? Wait, that's me!]

Rem giggles lightly as Subaru slaps his head and sticks out his tongue. Rem, trying to calm herself by clearing her throat, glances sideways at Subaru's face.

[If you keep complimenting Rem like that, Rem might get carried away a little.]

[Hm, was I really complimenting you just now? All I did was not reject what you said. Though everything you said was basically completely true.]

Subaru knew that if he complimented her too freely, he'd get carried away with praise again and it'd be a mess. In such a public place as a park with kids running around, parents and neighbors were everywhere.

Once he started sweet talking with Rem, she would egg him on until their affection was tomorrow's talk of the town.

That in and of itself wasn't too bad, Subaru thought as he relished the warm afternoon air.

If he closed his eyes, the comfort of the sun's warm rays made him feel like he was floating. The exhaustion from working long, late hours felt like it was being washed away as his head wavered slightly from its weight.

[Hm?]

[If you'd like, please rest on Rem's shoulder. Rem's lap is currently being occupied.]

Opening his eyes, Subaru finds his body already resting against Rem. There was a noticeable difference in their sitting heights. If he adjusted his neck, Subaru could comfortably rest his head on her shoulder.

As he leaned, Subaru saw Spica lying peacefully in Rem's arms. Her jet black hair from her father and the pretty shape of her fair face from her mother. A dear existence that lives day to day, ignorant of the world around her.

[Grr, Spica. While you are my daughter, how *dare* you steal my precious sanctuary from me. I'll be giving you the tickle treatment later.]

[Dear, please wait until nighttime before monopolizing Rem's breasts.]

[Hey, let's be careful about the remarks we make in a public park in broad daylight, okay!?!]

Rem's bold comment caused a wave of panic in Subaru. But when he peered at her face, he saw that she was blushing fiercely. *Really now*, he thought.

[My wife is just way too cute.]

[Because Rem is loved by her dear everyday.]

As Subaru flirts and Rem flirts in turn, they indulge in each other's loving smiles. Rem's giggling and Subaru's goofy laughter could be heard faintly from afar.

Eventually getting embarrassed, Subaru nervously scratches his cheek. [Then I guess I'll take you up on your offer] he says as he rests his head on Rem's shoulder.

The sensation of the wind rustling Rem's blue hair against his cheek felt very pleasant to Subaru. Its scent wafted to his nose as he rubbed his cheek against her shoulder.

[Dear, that tickles.]

[Oh, sorry. I guess I got a bit carried away because it felt so nice. I'll learn from Spica and calm down. I'll leave getting carried away to Rigel. Wow, Rigel's *suuuch a kiid~*]

[I can hear you, stupid Dad! Stop bringing me up all the time!]

[Rigel. Your sister is sleeping at the moment. Please keep your voice down.]

[GODDAMNIT!]

The frozen Rigel screams like a delinquent, but none of his family responds. To add insult to injury, no one's coming to unfreeze him either. At the moment, Rigel is thoroughly being teased.

While Rigel's personality, speech, and actions are similar to his own, it comforts Subaru that at the very least the other kids don't bully him. At the same time, it doesn't feel like they accept him as one of their own, making Rigel's future admittedly not too bright.

[We should make sure Spica doesn't turn out like that. Even though Rigel's like that, you have your mother's looks so your future's definitely bright. All that's left is to pray you don't get caught by a useless guy like me.]

[There isn't a person anywhere that could replace you. Rem's dear is the only one in the world.]

Laughing softly from his wife's loving remarks, a comfortable silence falls between them. A gentle breeze caresses them as Subaru savors the heat from Rem's body. Eventually, he carelessly drifts to sleep.

Lately, the fatigue from laboring has built up in his body. Yet the precious moments spent with his family filled his days with bliss. Bathing in the bright sunlight, watching his son being teased by his friends, Subaru rests against his wife as he succumbs to a light nap.

--*What a wonderful, blissful moment*, he thought.

[Subaru-kun--]

Hearing his name, Subaru opens his eyes.

Peering in the direction of the voice, he finds Rem turning her neck to face him. He sees himself in her clear blue eyes as they wordlessly bring their lips together.

[...my name]

[-----]

[It's been a while. Lately it's been "Dear" or "Your Father" after all.]

Looking on at Rem, Subaru relaxes his face, yet Rem brings her lips to his once more.

Her attitude reminds him of several years ago, the way she was from "when they had just escaped." While she thought that he wouldn't have noticed, Subaru had watched over her more closely than she thought.

Closing his eyes, Subaru feels the wind rushing past them.

Today's shopping trip was in fact Rem's idea. Subaru had a general idea what her intentions were for this trip. After all,

[It's been eight years since *that day* huh.]

[So you remembered after all...]

[Of course, to me.... No, to *us* wasn't that day a huge turning point?

There's no way I'd forget.

---There's *no way* I'd forget.]

The day he lost against fate. The day he threw away everything, the day he ran away from everything. The day when he intended to give up everything, but just couldn't give up one person.

The decision from that day, and that girl's love --- it was because of those that right now Subaru is able to live like this.

[Subaru-kun, do you...]

That familiar way of calling him, which she intentionally stopped using after the two escaped to Kararagi. In order to prove the bond of husband and wife to themselves and those around them... and also to try to build something distinct from the past they had escaped from.

Until today, Subaru had not asked for the reason, nor did Rem ever tell him.

Among the many things they left behind was this way of calling him. With a troubled face and a mix of emotions, she asks him,

[Do you feel regret?]

[Regret?]

[Yes. About running away. About giving up. About throwing away everything. About choos-]

[If you say anything about choosing you, I'm going to get angry. I'll take Rigel and Spica home straightaway. Actually, nevermind about Rigel. *He* can stay here.]

From afar, Subaru sees Rigel make a sour face, but Subaru's face tells him [We're having an important talk right now]. He turns back to Rem and continues,

[You know, it's kind of late at this point, and honestly I've probably already told you this many times, tens of times, *hundreds* of times, so I don't know if it'll even mean much.]

[Yes?]

[I love you more than anyone else in the world. You're the only one for me, and I'm the only one for you. And you're definitely not the kind of woman that a guy like me could get from giving up and compromising.]

Subaru moves towards Rem and softly flicks her forehead. A surprised Rem holds her forehead as Subaru moves his face in close.

[Just as I promised that day, everything I have is yours. I will serve you. I will devote myself to you. I will live just for you. --- And now, I suppose I'll live for our kids too.]

With his lips approaching past her nose, Rem closes her eyes as he steals her lips.

Sharing their light kiss, Subaru's face hovers close enough to feel Rem's quickened breath. And with a mischievous smile that hadn't changed even with the passage of time, he says,

[So will this put you at ease?]

[...Rem is sorry. Rem is always so anxious. Because Rem keeps falling further and further in love with Subaru-kun. Every time it feels like things couldn't possibly be any happier, Subaru-kun always manages to make Rem even happier. Rem is so happy, and loves Subaru-kun so much, and that's why Rem is anxious.]

Tears well in her eyes and her chest shakes as Rem admits to him how happy she has become. Shaking her head, she rests her forehead against his, and they share in their body heat.

[Even though I can touch you right now, I'm always afraid I'll lose you.]

[Don't worry. I won't ever let you go, and I won't go anywhere either. As long as I have your love, there's no way we'll ever be apart.]

[Rem will never stop loving Subaru-kun--]

[Good, then we'll always be together. I love you Rem.]

While Rem's head is filled with thoughts and emotions, Subaru once again kisses her. His lips brush against her teeth as he pushes further against the surprised maiden. Their tongues entangle as they feel the sensation of their warm saliva.

They stop there and part their lips. Rem breathes shallowly as Subaru points his finger upwards and continues,

[Also, don't talk about it as if it was some sort of compromise. That would mean Rigel and Spica were born not from love, but *sympathy*. Spica is a crystallization of our love that we've been planning for years, and Rigel is the result of the *fiery passion* of our youth.]

[....It sure was hard when Rigel was born.]

In front of Subaru who was scolding her with a hand on his hip, Rem fondly reminisced with a smile emerging on her face.

Now deep in the past, Rem waved her finger as if tracing back the memories.

[After moving to Kararagi and finding a home and workplace, we were supposed to take our time getting things together and building our livelihood.]

[Hey but, you know, we were *young* so we lacked patience and-]

[Even though Subaru-kun should have been exhausted after coming home from work, you always got *really lively* right before bed.]

[Hey but, you know, we were *young* so we had too much stamina and-]

[When the employment was officialized, Rem became pregnant around the same time. At the time, Rem's face practically turned *blue*.]

[It's kind of painful to admit the mistakes made in the springtime of youth....]

In response to Rem's bold accusations, Subaru could only stare into the distance while muttering sheepishly. In the distance, Rigel, who was currently being treated as a "mistake," showed a sour face, but he read the atmosphere and calmed down without saying anything. *Quite a kid*, Subaru thought.

Subaru nodded at his son's remarkable growth. Beside him, Rem also looked on at her son's sour face and, with a small breath, continued,

[But when Rem was pregnant with Rigel, Rem was really, really happy.]

[Well of course I was happy too. When I first heard, my nose started running and I pissed myself a little. Then I wanted to make sure it wasn't a dream so I asked you to punch me, and it was a *complete* blood bath.]

It may have been because Rem was emotional at the time, but she had swung full force at Subaru, causing him to slam into the wall with such force that the entire building shook. If she hadn't unconsciously held back, it wouldn't have been strange for Subaru to have died outright.

Leaving aside *those* memories, Subaru could clearly remember the time Rem told him she was pregnant. He also vividly recalled the feelings welling in his chest.

However, Rem shook her head at Subaru's answer. He couldn't quite understand the meaning behind it, so he cocked his head in turn.

[The reason Rem was happy was somewhat different from the reason Subaru-kun was happy. The reason Rem was happy was because now... now Rem wouldn't have to worry about losing Subaru-kun.]

[.....]

[To Rem, Rigel is a definite bond between Rem and Subaru-kun. It sounds wrong that way but, when we had our first baby, it was also a link between us that would always exist. ...That's why Rem was so happy.]

Perhaps Rem had always struggled with this anxiety. After throwing away everything she held dear, just the two of them escaped to a completely new land. With no one and nothing to cling to but each other, Rem always struggled with the fear that she would someday lose Subaru as well.

Her low self-confidence would prove an impressive match for Subaru's. For Rem, who rates herself strictly, her life with Subaru was both fantastically happy and yet incredibly anxiety-inducing. It was the birth of the new life between them that finally put an end to that uneasy time.

[Did you have a hard time believing?]

[No. Rem believes in Subaru-kun more than anyone in the world.]

[That's not it. I didn't ask if you believed in me... I was asking if you had trouble believing in *yourself*.]

Hearing Subaru's response, Rem takes a small breath and nods. To Rem, Subaru's existence was so very large. And yet because she looks at herself so poorly, she worried that her own existence was but a small shadow next to his.

---But in a way, Subaru also felt the same. He had always felt that, when compared to himself, Rem was far too wonderful of a girl for him.

It's so strange I can't help but laugh, Subaru thought as his face relaxed into a goofy grin. Rem sees this and puffs her cheeks.

[Nevermind. Rem was being dumb. It can't be helped that you'd laugh at her...]

[No, no that's not it. I was just thinking that you and I are really very alike. And so then I thought that my wife is definitely the cutest in the world.]

Unprepared for Subaru's surprise attack, Rem freezes in surprise for a moment, and then explodes into a feverous blush. *Watching her react like this, I really get the feeling that I love her*, thought Subaru.

More than anyone else in the world, I love Rem. I love her. I could scream it at the top of my lungs.

Actually, in reality, he sometimes does. In the neighborhood, they're known for being an incredibly loving couple.

[---Rigel, Spica.]

[Hm?]

Rem appears to lovingly call her children's names. But she shakes her head to say [No]. She looks toward Subaru and says,

[They were both the name of stars, yes? From the place that Subaru-kun came from, they were how you called them.]

[Yeah, my dad was basically a nut, the sort of sad human being who could barely read, but I thought that his idea to name me after a star was good. I really like it, my name. "Subaru" is also the name of a star from there.]

Back around elementary school, there was an assignment to investigate the origins of one's name, and it was then that Subaru learned of the history of his name. When he learned that he was named after one of the dancing stars of the night sky, he couldn't contain his excitement. Since then, while he couldn't keep interest in much of anything, he at least continued to gaze at astronomy charts in his spare time. He knew the names of stars by heart, and if a chance to name something came up, it was always an obvious choice how he'd do it.

[I'd always use the names of stars. With things like usernames on the Internet, I'd always use stars as nicknames. In a sense, aren't these names *SHINING!*?]

[Rem doesn't know what Subaru-kun is talking about, but using the names of stars sounds beautiful. When the third one comes, we'll do just that.]

[Isn't it a bit early to talk about a third? I mean, isn't Spica still a baby?]

[Aside from feeding, we can leave everything to Rigel. Why do you think Rem said to wait until Rigel was bigger before having our next child?]

[You know, usually it seems like I'm mainly the one bullying him, but don't you actually go at him way harder!?]

Pondering the daily verbal abuse his son suffers, Subaru gets up and brushes himself off. As Rem looks up toward him, he casually stretches his back and shakes his hips.

[I think it's about time we head home and put away the groceries. Plus, there's too many eyes around here to flirt to my heart's content.]

[Yes. Right now Rem is in the mood to flirt to with all her strength and passion.]

[I- I wonder if my libido will be able to keep up with the stamina of an oni....]

Muttering to himself sheepishly, Subaru extends his hand to Rem, sitting on the park bench. Rem slowly grabs his hand, but Subaru suddenly pulls her up. The girl makes an audible [Wa!] as he skillfully catches her in his arms. He hugs her along with Spica and savors their warmth.

[Alright, let's go back. To our home that is.]

[Yes dear.]

Holding the groceries in one hand, he grasps Rem's hand in the other. Walking half a step behind Subaru, Rem snuggles with him as they walk.

[Hey, my son frozen for an eternity in a winter wonderland. Watching your stagnant game of freeze tag was *supremely* boring so we'll be heading home. Go stay at a friend's house for the night.]

[So you're flatly kicking me out for the night!? Plus, what kind of parents come to a park in broad daylight to kiss anyway!?!]

[Ha, you're just jealous. Sorry, Rigel. This Rem belongs only to me.]

[SOOOOOOOO ANNOYIIING!!]

While Subaru laughs proudly with his head held high, Rigel yells back with a demonic face. But seeing his father only get more festive, Rigel takes a deep breath and shakes his head.

[Calm down, calm down me. Don't get caught up in your old man's pace. Calm down, calm down~. Alright, I've calmed down. So, what were you talking about with mom?]

[Oh? We were talking about how your name comes from a star and stuff like that. You know our first idea was to name you "Vega."]

[That sounds strong as hell! Why didn't you?]

[Well, it sounds strong right? Like you would grow up to be really strong, and then you'd be too strong to handle in your rebellious phase, so I decided against it. Even though you'll eventually surpass me in strength, the dad in me said he didn't want to lose to his son so soon.]

[You thought about all this for a baby who was only a few days old!?!]

Rigel flails about after hearing Subaru's casual banter. Then,

[Heeey, Rigel's *moving*! You're breaking the rules of freeze tag!]

[Ah!]

Despite ignoring him completely while he was frozen, the other children quickly pointed out his mistake the second he moved. Rigel's in shock as he stands there stunned. Subaru pats him on the back and says,

[Those who break the rules of freeze tag suffer a penalty game. You get tickled by the others until you can't even cry anymore. --- Good luck.]

[What the hell are you saying with such a serious face.... Hey, what are you, GUYS! Wait, stop for a second! Don't just listen to everything this guy says! Wait, UWAAAAAAAAA-----!!]

Hordes of children descend upon Rigel and chase him about. Rigel tried to escape. But they eventually corner him. From there they grab his arms and push him to the ground. With no chance to resist, countless fingers begin tickling him.

[So long kiddo. You were a good son. It was your father who was the bad one.]

[Rigel, your mother and father have some important business to attend to, so please stay at a friend's house for the night. Also, the use of your horns is forbidden. And don't let your clothes get torn.]

[I- I'll remember this you heartless parents---!!!]

As a mountain of fingers tickle him relentlessly, Rigel's forced laughter can be heard even from a distance. Seeing her older brother in such a state, Spica raises her voice in excitement and delight.

Well well, seems like she's got promising taste, Subaru thought. Her position in the family will be a lot more interesting.

To their beloved son whom they cannot help but adore, they showed a somewhat unusual way of expressing their love that day.

Subaru pulled Rem's hand along as he walked.

Towards the precious place where his family lives, the place filled with peace and happiness that they call home.

[Subaru-kun.]

[Hm?]

Feeling a tug on his arm, Subaru stops and turns around toward Rem. At that moment, a strong gust of wind blows about them. Subaru shuts his eyes involuntarily, opening them again after the winds had died down.

Rem's long blue hair was being carried by the wind, glimmering brilliantly as if it was blending into the sun's shining rays. Long ago, Rem had started growing out her hair. For whom she had grown it, Subaru now had a good idea. And when he thought of long-haired women, the very first to pop up in his mind was of course the one in front of him, the one he loved most in the entire world.

With her blue hair silently flowing behind her, and their beloved child held in her arms, Rem chased after Subaru with a brilliant smile on her face. Above all else, it was Rem's smile that stirred such feelings of fondness and love within him.

[Right now, Rem is the happiest in the entire world.]